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THE BARRIER BY REX BEACH

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(Continued)

CHAPTER IV.
THE SOLDIER FIXES AN UNBROKEN VALLEY.
MEADE BURRELL had experienced a profound sense of pity for Neela upon learning her father's relation to Al-huna, but this also largely vanished when he found that the girl was entirely oblivious to its significance. He had tried her in many subtle ways and found that she regarded the matter innocently, as customary, and therefore in the light of an accepted convention, nor did she seem to see anything in her blood or station to render her inferior to other women. She questioned him freely about his sister, and he was glad of this, for it placed no constraint between them.

As for her, each day brought a keener delight. She unfolded before the Kentuckian like some beautiful woodland flower and through innumerable, unnoticed familiarities took him into her innermost confidence.

A month of this went by, and then Ravon returned. He came on an up-lying steamer. The manner of his coming was bold, for he stood fairly upon the ship's deck, and his smile was evil now, as it had been before. With him was a stranger. When the boat was at rest Ravon sauntered down the gangplank and up to the lieutenant, who stood above the landing place and who noted that the stranger, close up against his husband, was wearing a hat. He greeted the officer with an insolent assurance.

"Well, I'm back again, you see, and I'm back to stay."
"Very well, Ravon. Did you bring an outfit with you?"
"Yes, and I'm pretty far besides."
He shook a well-taken golf sack at the officer.

"What do you want in this place anyhow?" demanded Burrell curiously.
"None of your d—d business," the man answered, grinning.
"Be sure it isn't," retorted the lieutenant, "because it would please me right down to the ground if it were. I'd like to get you."
"I'm glad we understand each other," Ravon said, falling into conversation with the stranger, who had been surveying the town without leaving the boat. Evidently this man had a voice in Ravon's affairs, for he not only gave him instructions, but he also gave him the handle of his merchandise, and Meade Burrell concluded that he must be some incoming tenderfoot who had grub staked the desperado to prospect in the hills back of Flambeau. As the two came up past him he saw that he was mistaken. This man was no more of a tenderfoot than Ravon. On the contrary, he had a bearing of one to whom new countries are old, who had tread the edge of things all his life. There was a hint of the meat-eating animal about him. His nose was keen and hawk-like, his walk and movements those of the predatory beast, and as he passed by Burrell observed that his eyes were of a peculiar cruelty that went well with his thin lips. He was older by far than Ravon, but while the latter was mean visaged and swaggering, the stranger's manner was noticeable for its repression.

Impelled by an irresistible desire to learn something about the man, the lieutenant followed after Ravon and his companion and entered the store in time to see the latter greet "No Creek" Lee, the prospector, who had come late to town for more food. Both men spoke with quiet restraint.

"Nine years since I saw you, Stark," said the miner. "Where you bound?"
"The diggings," replied Stark as Lee addressed the stranger.

"Mining now?"
"No; same old thing, but I'm grub-staking a few men, as usual. One of them stays here. I may open a house in Dawson if the camp is as good as they say it is."
"This here's a good place for you." Stark laughed noiselessly and without malice. "Fine! There must be a hundred people living here."
"Never mind; you take it from me," said the miner positively, "and get in now on the quiet. There's something going." His sharp eyes detected the lieutenant close by, so he drew his friend aside and began talking to him earnestly and with such evident effect as to alter Stark's plans on the moment, for when Ravon entered the store shortly Stark spoke to him quickly, following which they both hurried back to the steamer and saw to the unloading of much additional freight and baggage. From the volume and variety of this merchandise it was evident that Mr. Stark would in no wise be a burden to the community.

Burrell was not sufficiently versed in the ways of mining camps to know exactly what this abrupt change of policy meant, but that there was something in the air he knew from the manner of "No Creek" Lee and from the suppressed excitement of Ravon and the trader. His curiosity got the better of him finally, and he fell into talk with Lee, inquiring about the stranger by way of an opening.

"That's Ben Stark. I know him back in the 'country'." "But surely you must know if he is the same. She must have told you how he looked. Others must have told you."
"One shock his head. 'Very little. I could not ask her, and others knew him so well they never doubted that I had seen him, but this much I do know, he was dark.'"
"This man is dark."
"—and his spirit was like that of a mad horse."
"This man's temper is black."
"—and his eyes were cruel."
"This man has evil eyes."
"He looked five years of my age," said the trader.

"This man is forty years old. It must be so," said the square.

Even Neela would have marvelled had she heard this revelation of her father's age.



"The most wonderful thing has happened," she began.

father's age, for his hair and brows were grizzled, and his face had the look of a man of sixty, while only those who knew him well, like Ravon, were aware of his great strength and the endurance that belied his appearance.

"We will send Neela down to the mission tonight and let Father Ravon keep her there till this man goes," said the square after some deliberation.

"No; she must stay here," Gale replied, with decision. "The man has come here to live, so it won't do any good to send her away, and after all, what is to be will be. But she must never be seen in that dance girl's dress again, at least not till I learn more about this Stark. It makes no difference whether this one is the man or not. He will come, and I shall know him. For a year I have felt that the time was growing short, and now I know it."

(To Be Continued)

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"I have told you never to use your native tongue before strangers. That man in the store understands."
"Only asked for sugar to cook the berries with," she replied.

"True, but another time you might say more; therefore the less you speak the better. He is the kind who sees much and talks little. Address me in Swahili or in English unless we are alone."
Suddenly she dropped her work and came close up to him. "Can he be the one?"
"I don't know. Stark is not this name, but he might have changed it. He had reasons enough."
"Who is this man Stark?"
"I don't know that either. I used

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